

THE VOLGA GERMANS: A VILLAGE WAY OF LIFE

"Having this done [the farming], we went back starting again with the building of the Heimstaedten houses, because the law demanded a home on every Heimstaedte. The first Heimstaedten had all been erected on Section 4: My and Peter had S.E. $\frac{1}{4}$, each 80 acres, Jakob and Michael Meier the N.E. $\frac{1}{4}$, Johan Koerner and Justus Bissing the S.W. $\frac{1}{4}$. The houses had been built as previously told out of sod and covered with it, too. It had been built in the way that on each tract of 80 acres, each Heimstaedte that is, carried the half of the house.

"The corporation elected 5 Directors who among themselves elected a president, Secretary and treasurer. In the previous years the township officers had taken care of the business part of the village. From now on the board of directors had to attend to it. The four men who held the title for the 4 quarter - lots transferred now the contracts to the corporation. The land was divided in shares, each share comprising 5 acres. There were 125 shares in all and now, who wanted could buy some more shares, but no more than 8. The reason for this was because every share stood for one vote and no one should have too many votes. Furthermore, no one was allowed to sell his lot to a stranger, who could not be taken in unless he receive $\frac{2}{3}$ votes according to the bylaws. In 1897 it has been resolved at a meeting that the board of directors each one [receive] his deed for their lots. I had 4 shares, 20 acres and got a deed for 4 lots.

"In 1908 when all the land had been paid for, several wanted to know where their part of land be situated and wanted to have their copy of a deed. A petition was handed to the board of directors, signed by $\frac{2}{3}$ of the stockholders, asking that the country should be measured out in lots of the size of each ones possession and then chanced off. This was being done on March 8, 1908, as can be seen in the records of the Ellis County plot-book, page 48.

"I sold my shares before the land was chanced out, because it hand't been enough for me on one place. I got 400 Dollars for 18 acres not included the building lot. The village books and the bylaws are kept by Jakob Müller, the last president." (1876)

"The village Catharine has been existing for two years and the grounds on which it was built was still government property. That could not go on much longer, because anybody could by the land at any time, Being Schulland, no more than 160 acres could be given to a person, neither to a society, So we bought the three other quarters on the names of:

Friedreich Walter, the S.W. $\frac{1}{4}$

Friedrich Koerner, the S.E. $\frac{1}{4}$

Jakob Walter, the N.E. $\frac{1}{4}$.

These lots were afterwards to [be] divided that each one who wanted a building lot had to take also 5 acres for eagh one. Und each one himself had to pay for his land, capital and interests. T is however led to dissension. Some had more land and less stock and were saying therefore, we wont buy land and let someone else's cattle graze on it. This strife went till April 1893, up to the time the village took a charter and became incorporated as St. Catharine Dorf und Waide." (1878)

When the Germans moved to Russia, they settled together in villages. Everyone built his house and barn in the village so he could be near his friends and relatives, and so his family would be close to church and school. Especially when they first settled along the Volga, living together made the German colonists feel more secure from the attacks of the Kirghiz tribesmen. Most of the villagers were farmers. Because they all lived in the village, they had to walk some distance to get to their fields. Each morning the men would take their tools and their lunches and go to the fields outside the village. At day's end they would return home to the village.

All the houses in the village were built close to the street. A bench was set along the house next to the road so that people could sit and chat and perhaps play cards. During good weather there was always someone out sitting on the bench. Every house had a high wooden fence around it. Inside the fence was the entrance to the house and also a barn, an ambar, and sometimes a bachhaus or summer kitchen where the women could cook during hot summer weather.

Each village was almost like a little country of its own. People in it spoke the same dialect, ate the same types of foods, celebrated holidays the same way, dressed the same, and almost always married someone who also lived in the village. Only rarely did people travel outside their village to visit another village or town.

Unlike farmers in the United States, Volga Germans did not own their fields. They only owned the land in the village upon which their house and barn were built. The rest of the land - pasture and fields - were owned altogether by everyone in the village. In other words, the fields and pasture were owned in common. This was a tradition brought with them from Germany. However in Russia, they added something new to the tradition. The land suitable for farming and grazing was divided every ten years among the adult men in the village. At the end of

each ten years, the land was divided again. That way no one ever was stuck with poor land for more than ten years. This method of distributing farmland was called the Mir system. It made all the villagers even more closely dependent upon one another...almost like one very big family.

When the Volga Germans began to emigrate from Russia to Kansas, they usually left their villages in groups. In this way, they had friends and relatives with them for the long trip. They were more comfortable and felt safer than they would have if they had joined a group of strangers traveling to America. Their loyalty to their home village was still very strong.

Once in America, the Volga German immigrants looked for land to buy. They looked for two important things when they went to see land that was for sale. First, it had to be good land - land on which they could grow crops. The Volga German farmer tested the land by putting the soil in his mouth and tasting. If it tasted of grain, it was good. Second, there had to be enough land altogether in one large section so that a village could be established like the one they had left in Russia. Often after the first group left Russia and settled in Kansas, others from the village followed and came to live with their friends in America.

Many new immigrants to the United States took advantage of the Homestead Law of 1862 which promised free land to anyone who would build a house on the land and farm it. But the law definitely required a person to actually live on the land. For the Volga Germans who wished to live together in a village rather than alone on isolated farms, the law was not helpful. So, many Volga German groups pooled their money and bought land from the railroads in one large section. Railroads had been given large tracts of land along the rail lines to help them with the high cost of building railroads across the country. Both the Santa Fe and the Union Pacific Railroads had land in Kansas and hired land agents to sell that land to the Russian Germans and other immigrants.

Once the land was purchased, the Volga Germans set about building a village as much like the one they had left in Russia as possible. Often, they even named their new village the same as the one they had left in Russia. If you recall, Athanasius Karlin and the group who settled in Ellis County left Kathareninstadt in Russia and named their new village in Kansas Catharinensteadt. They tried hard to make their life in America like it had been along the Volga. They continued to speak German and used that language in the schools and churches they established. They built houses much like those they had lived in in their old village. Each family owned land in the village for their house, barn, and ambar. Together they owned the farmland and grazing pasture. The men went out daily to the fields and returned to the village in the evening.

But the old ways were hard to keep. Often they had not bought enough land in the beginning and so had to homestead other land later. That meant that each family had to live on their homesteaded land. In Russell, Kansas, the Protestant Volga Germans who settled there finally had to give up their village system and live on farms instead.

In Ellis County, the Catholic Volga Germans tried something else. The citizens of Catherine (Catherinenstadt), for example, put some of their money together and bought other land next to the village and fields. Later, they formed a company called the St. Catharine Town and Grazing Company and each male member of the village bought shares. A company could legally own large amounts of land in Kansas whereas an informal community-ownership system like the Mir would not be recognized by the government.

As the villages grew, the fields got to be so far from home that the farmer could not walk out to them in the morning and return in the evening. He needed to stay out on the fields in order to get the work done. So, there developed in the villages in Ellis County a two-house system - one house in the village, one on the

farm. Although the house at the farm was often very small, the man and his family lived there during planting and growing seasons. During winter, the children stayed in town to attend school and everyone returned to the village on the weekends to go to church. This unique two-house system eventually ended because the cost of maintaining two houses was so expensive and because the coming of the automobile made it possible to go to school and church in town without actually living there. The villages declined in population and people began living on the farm. The Ellis County Volga German had been able to retain their village way of life for a number of years after emigration. In fact, they were the only Volga German group in Kansas to successfully keep the old ways for any long period of time. Gradually they, too, came to adopt many of the American ways and their lifestyles changed. Yet today they still celebrate traditional holidays, eat Russian-German foods, and maintain close ties with their church and their town.